



Introduction

Chapters 5 to 7 of the gospel according to Matthew recount of a time when Jesus ascended the mountain of olives, and sitting his disciples down- began to teach them. It was a session with which he authoritatively (Matthew 7: 28-29) enlightened on christian like practices and how to carry on with them. One of them for which he taught was 'fasting.'

While at the mountain, the scripture stipulates that Jesus commenced the sermon on fasting with the phrase: *When you fast...* (Matthew 6:16). The parlance in using the words *When you fast..* and not *If you fast..* convey how Christ perceived the act (fasting) as one that ought to be a regular practice among his followers.

Many at the time however, seemingly began to wonder why despite teaching on fasting, Jesus' disciples were not carrying out the practice (Matthew 9:14). In response, Jesus asserted how his disciples *will* (not conditional) fast when He (Christ) left the world (Matthew 9:15). Being the *groom* there was no need for the *bride* to fast when he was there. Indeed, after Jesus' ascension- his disciples did fast as evidenced in Acts 13: 2-4 and Acts 14: 23.

Therefore, If fasting is a required practice among believers as attested above, what then is Fasting?. To get to the realization of what the practice is, it is important to know how, where or when it commenced.

THE ORIGIN:

Pin pointing the exact period when fasting was first carried out is quite hard. For reasons that vary from religious to cultural and physiological or therapy, the practice is one that dates to several centuries back.

History has it of cultures that fasted before an important activity such as hunting or war, as a way of seeking success- an act that involved cries as pleas to the super natural.

As far as the 5th century BC, Hippocrates who is considered as the father of western medicine, believed fasting enabled self healing of the body and therefore recommended restraint from specific foods as treatment for some illnesses.

More importantly though in regards to our faith as children of God, fasting has all along been a practice of believers. Way before the founding of Christ's

church, the Israelites fasted to Yahweh. On festivals such as 'Yom Kippur' (the day of atonement, of divine judgement: 'affliction of souls'-Leviticus 23: 26-32), and for various reasons as shown by in the old testament through Moses, David, Ezra, Esther among others and the Jewish community as a whole, the practice of fasting has been part and parcel of God's family.

Definition of Fasting.

The term fasting is derived from fast, which in turn comes from an Old English (Anglo saxon) word: *fæstan*, which means to hold firmly. It is in that accord that during fasting, we hold firm in control of ourselves against temptations such as food, and carry ourselves in observance. It basically equates to the act of being immovable in a resolve.

In Modern English, fasting is generally defined as giving up food (or something else) for a period of time.

With fasting comes the practice of abstinence which basically refers to refraining from something that is good, and not inherently sinful.

St. John Chrysostom teaches that fasting 'is a support to the soul: one that gives us wings to ascend on high, and enjoy the highest contemplation.'

To ascend high in the presence of God, we are required to be humble, for it is only the humble that the Lord raises. (Matthew 5:5, James 4:10, 1 Peter 5:6).

As described in the book of Ezra, fasting is a way of 'humbling oneself before the Lord.'

" There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God....." (Ezra 8:21 NIV).

Ezra who was a descendant from the lineage of Aaron, was a priest and scribe at the time when the Israelites were in exile in Babylon. As he prepared the second group of Jews on a return to Jerusalem, he did not ask Cyrus: the then emperor of the Persian empire for troops to guard them on their journey. He instead placed his people's protection in God's hands, and to do so- he proclaimed a fast.

As stated in Ezra 8:21, the reason of the fast was for the Israelites to *humble themselves before God* (.....so I proclaimed a fast, '**so**' that we may humble ourselves before God..), before petitioning their request for protection. Indeed

as narrated in the verses that follow, the Lord protected them.

" So we fasted and petitioned our God about this (protection), and he answered our prayer.." (Ezra 8:23 NIV).

The practice of fasting as a channel of 'humbling oneself before God' is further decoded in the book of Daniel. After receiving a revelation that was quite hard for him to understand, Daniel went into a three week fast in which he ate no meat and drank no wine (Daniel 10: 1-3).

Days later after commencing his fast, Daniel received a vision while standing at river Tigris that left him unconscious (Daniel 10: 4-9). When the Angel of God raised him up, He said to Daniel:

Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and 'to humble yourself before your God', your words were heard, and I have come in response to them." (Daniel 10: 12 NIV)

The Angel of the Lord described Daniel's fast as a decision made 'to humble himself before God', and like it was with the Israelites in Ezra's time, the Lord answered Daniel.

The Psalmist also affirms in the same accord:

"...I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting." (Psalms 35: 13-14 NIV).

David further asserts on the humility engraved in fasting in his cry for help to the Lord in Psalms 69: 10:

" When I humbled my soul with fasting..... (NRSV)" he states before revealing his troubles and seeking the Lord's intercession.

As believers, it should be our utmost desire to have ourselves humbled before God-knowing that in doing so, He will have us uplifted (Matthew 23:12, James 4:10, 1 Peter 5:5, Micah 6:8). Fasting, avails to us as christians: a matchless means to do so.

When to Fast.

As a believer, it is very commendable to fast at any time when the need to 'humble oneself before God' arises. Fasting ought to be a regular practice among the faithful, one that can be done as a group, or by an individual. Wholly, one of the times in which fasting is carried out is during the period of lent.

The Lenten Period.

The word *lent* itself is derived from the Anglo-Saxon words '*lencten*' meaning-*spring*, and '*lenctentid*' meaning-*lengthen*. The period is observed in the spring when the days begin to get longer. Lent is a great part of the history of the Christian Church, and dates as far as the third century, the earliest mention of it coming from the council of Nicaea in about 325 AD.

The season of lent begins on Ash Wednesday, and occurs 46 days (40 fasting days because Sunday's are not day's of fast) before Easter. The number 40 is of great spiritual significance as regards preparation. A number of Biblical events revolve on the number 40, (the flood in Noah's time lasting 40 days and nights, Moses fasting 40 days before receiving the ten commandments, Elijah fasting 40 days before climbing the mountain of the Lord among others).

The 40 days of lent are however mirrored on the 40 days the Lord Jesus spent fasting in the wilderness where he endured temptation by the devil, as he prepared to start his ministry (**Matthew 4: 1-11**).

In the season of lent, the faithful are called to have a reflection on the Paschal Mystery. The period is one of spiritual renewal and of self focus: based on growing our faith in the Lord. At the end of Jesus' time in the wilderness, the devil departed from the Lord, and the Savior was left strengthened as the Angels ministered to him (**Matthew 4: 11**). We too ought to use the period of lent to get into a wilderness of our own, reflect on our lives, have the devil depart from us, and have our strength renewed in the presence of the Lord.

Almsgiving is a practice also very much acknowledged to be carried out during lent. In the book of 1 John, the writer elaborates the definition of God as love. He explains how it is impossible to claim to love God, and yet not do so to the people He created (1 John 4: 19-21).

"Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth." (1 John 3: 18 NIV), he further teaches.

Therefore, as reflectors of the love begotten from the Lord, the faithful are encouraged to show love in deed through majorly acts of mercy. Visiting the sick, the homebound, the aged, and those in prison, sheltering the homeless, feeding the hungry, are all commendable, as these are branches of love which

as believers we are attached to when we receive the Holy Spirit which gives unto us as one of His fruits: that of love, which is the greatest of them all. (1 Corinthians 13: 1-10[Paul compares the gift of love to the other gifts of the Holy Spirit])

Therefore, Fasting, abstinence, together with charity and almsgiving in the season of lent, unite us to the crucified Christ reflected in the image of our neighbors that toil in suffering.

The acts of love therefore shown to our brothers and sisters during the period, should not fade away with the season. The lent period is meant to help us renew ourselves by the help of the Holy Spirit to align to the Christian-like way of life, and carry on in the same manner through the other days of our lives.

Relevance of Fasting.

Prayer is defined as a way of communicating to God.

As christians, we are required of to pray so often such that our relationship with the creator is kept alit. For reasons that vary as taught in the Lord's prayer (**Matthew 6: 9-13 NIV**), people pray for a variety of purposes. We pray:

- In Adoration. ("Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" [Matthew 6: 9]).

We pray in acknowledgement of the glory and holiness of the Lord, and in so doing worship Him.

- In Petition. ([Matthew 6: 11- 13]). A prayer of petition can be divided into three;
 - One in which we ask for our needs ("Give us today our daily bread").
 - One in which we confess, repent and seek reconciliation with God and our neighbors ("And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors").
 - And one in which we ask for the Lord's protection (And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one).
- In Thanksgiving. ("...Then Jesus looked up and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me" [**John 11: 41 NIV**]).

Jesus said the prayer moments before raising his friend Lazarus from

the dead, a notation that is left as lesson to us that follow Christ (Christians), to always give thanks to God in prayer.

St. Paul further illuminates on thanksgiving as a form of prayer in his first letter to the Thessalonians.

"Pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances: for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." (1 Thessalonians 5: 17-18 NIV).

Giving thanks in prayer as described by the apostle Paul, is 'the will of God in Christ Jesus.'

Among believers, the tool of prayer has certainly established root, and many faithful do so at different times and stages in regard to their need of uniting with the Father.

The artefact of fasting though, unlike prayer:- isn't well entrenched in the lives of many believers. For reasons that vary from fear to naivety, majority of christians have eluded the practice of fasting as a pillar in their walk of faith.

St. Peter Chrysologus inculcates that:

"Fasting is the soul of prayer.....so if you pray: you must fast..."

Remarks by St. Isaac the Syrian certify in agreement with Chrysologus' (fasting being the soul of prayer.)

"When a man begins to fast, he straight away yearns in his mind to enter into converse (prayer) with God." St. Isaac the Syrian.

It is no wonder that in the scripture, the precept of 'prayer' is very much accompanied with 'fasting' on a number of inscriptions.

In his time, Nehemiah 'fasted and prayed' when he heard of how devastated the city of Jerusalem had turned out to be (Nehemiah 1: 4). The scriptures of Daniel (9: 3-5), Esther (4: 15-16) and Ezra (8: 21-23) also stipulate prayer being accompanied with fasting.

In the New Testament, the Gospel according to Luke tells of a widowed prophetess named Anna: who never left the Temple but worshipped the Lord with fasting and prayer (Luke 2: 36-37).

Long after Christ's ascension, the church at Antioch was in 'fasting and prayer' when the Spirit of the Lord appointed Barnabas and Paul for a specific duty in evangelism. (Acts 13: 1-3).

In that duty (assigned by the Holy Spirit), Barnabas and Paul through 'fasting and prayer', committed unto the Lord the church elders that they appointed in the cities of Derbe, Lystra and Ico'nium (Acts 14: 20-23).

In the Gospel of Mark when Jesus' disciples had failed to heal an epileptic boy that had with him a dumb spirit, the Lord made it known to them that: *"This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting."* (Mark 9: 14-29).

Whenever prayer is accompanied with fasting, the heart of God is touched, and the impact enormous. As stated by St. Basil: *"By fasting, we satisfy God."*

With the scripture evincing the significance of accompanying prayer with fasting, fasting without prayer may as well be termed as: 'simply going hungry'. Prayer defines the value of a fast.

Akin to prayer, fasting too as a way of reaching out to God is carried out for various purposes.

Why we Fast.

As detailed when expounding on the meaning of fasting, the practice is a means of humbling ourselves before God. (Daniel 10: 4-9, 12, Psalms 35: 13-14 and Ezra 8: 21-23). Throughout the scripture, people of God humbled themselves before Yahweh in fasting as an impetus on varied grounds. .

In worship to the Lord.

Anna the daughter of Phanuel, was a prophetess who was widowed at an early age. After her husband's death, the scripture says Anna spent the rest of her life in fast and prayer: as a form of woship to God (Luke 2: 36-37).

Just like is the case with prayer, we reach out to God when we fast. As believers therefore, we fast to acknowledge the Glory of the Lord and worship Him.

In preparation for Ministry.

When Moses climbed up Mount Sinai, he stayed there and fasted forty days and nights as he prepared to receive the ten commandments from the Lord. (Deuteronomy 9: 9-10).

In the verse that follows, Moses repeats the affirmation as an emphasis of

how the commandments were given to him after he had finished fasting-and was ready to receive them.

" At the end of the forty days and forty nights, the Lord gave me the two stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant." (Deuteronomy 9: 11 NIV).

Our Lord Jesus Christ after being baptized, went into the wilderness and endured forty days and nights of fasting before commencing His Father's work. In his time there (in the wilderness), the scripture says: the Angels of the Lord administered to Him. At the end of the fast, Christ was strengthened and ready to begin the work for which He was sent. (Matthew 4: 1-11).

As believers, the Lord calls us to serve Him in different ways. The apostle Paul gives emphasis on the broadness of the Lord's calling (ministry) in his letter to the church in Rome:

" We have different gifts according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy....if it is serving, then serve: if it is teaching, then teach: if it is to encourage, then give encouragement: if it is giving, then give generously: if it is to lead, do it diligently..." (Romans 12: 6-8 NIV)

The calling of ministry does not only therefore apply to evangelism. Like St. Paul wrote (Romans 12: 6-8), we are called differently. Whatever the calling or ministry however, we ought to prepare ourselves before we embark on the work entrusted to us.

Fasting, is a great pillar when it comes to preparation like we have evidenced from Moses and Christ Himself. Before getting into the calling of matrimony: fast to the Lord in preparation. Before taking up that office of service, fast in preparation. In whatever work the Lord calls us to do as His children, we are required to align ourselves and the imminent work with Him. When we do so, the will and strength to accomplish the task beforehand is availed.

In Repentance.

Being sorry comes with humility. It is quite hard to find the proud sincerely apologetic for a trespass committed. Knowing how much fasting humbles us before the Lord, the period is ideal for atonement and repentance.

When Moses returned from Mount Sinai after initially receiving the ten

commandments, he found the Israelites worshipping a golden calf. Fearing the wrath God would cast on his people, Moses went into fasting for forty days and nights. (This was after fasting the same period in preparation to receive the commandments). He says:

"When I looked, I saw that you had sinned against the Lord your God.... Then once again I fell prostrate before the Lord for forty days and forty nights: I ate no bread and drank no water, because of all the sin you had committed, doing what was evil in the Lord's sight and so arousing his anger." (Deuteronomy 9: 16,18 NIV).

On behalf of his brother Aaron and the rest of the Israelites, Moses fasted that long in atonement. The Lord listened to him and forgave the people for whom he fasted in repentance. (Deuteronomy 9: 19-20).

The great city of Nineveh was one that also fasted in repentance. After the prophet Jonah had proclaimed as the Lord had told him (the city to be destroyed in forty days), the inhabitants together with their King went into fasting as an atonement (Jonah 3: 5-7). As result, the Lord had pity on them, changed His mind, and pardoned them.

As believers, there is no entity of us that touches the heart of the Lord like a repentant heart. Psalms 51:17 states how a humble and repentant heart can not be rejected by God. A repentant heart is a trigger like no other, for there is more joy in heaven when one confesses, repents and turns to the Lord (Luke 15: 7-10).

As pilgrims in our journey of faith, we over time fall short of the glory of the Lord (Romans 3: 10-12). It is therefore required of us to renew the royalty we have with God through repentance. Fasting, is one way to have that relationship re-ignited: for a humble spirit and heart is one before which God can not turn away from.

As a Strong hold for Prayer.

When we add fasting to the petitions we offer to God in prayer, we earnestly seek his intervention. Regarded as the *soul of prayer*' by St. Peter Chrysologus, fasting is a pillar so vital in our supplication towards God.

- Mordecai, Esther and the rest of the Jews that were in Susa (the capital of the Persian Empire) at the time of King Xerxes' reign, fasted and prayed when

Haman issued a decree on the King's behalf to have all Jews slaughtered. After three days of prayer and fasting, the King let Esther meet him and as they'd (the Jews) prayed, the King spared their lives. In addition, he had Mordecai elevated to second in rank to Him, and the Jews were granted victory over their enemies. (Esther 3,4,5,6,9 and 10).

When we offer ourselves completely in prayer and fasting, the Lord delivers us from the snares of the evil one.

- In the same accord, Ezra and the Jews also fasted with prayer as they sought the Lord's protection during the second migration of the Israelites back to Jerusalem. They did so (fasted) for themselves, their children, and possessions. In response, the Lord protected them and kept them safe through the trekk (Ezra 8: 21-23).

- The Bible instructs the faithful to ask the Lord for wisdom whenever a need for the essence arises (James 1: 5). When Daniel was finding difficulty in interpreting a revelation, he fasted and prayed in yearn to gain understanding (Daniel 10: 1-2). The Lord listened to his plea and sent an Angel to unveil the message to him. (Daniel 10: 12).

Many at times in our homes, places of service or line of work, we are faced with scenarios where a decision ought to be well thought before being taken. Prayer and fasting unveil before our sights means that our normal minds would never have thought of, for our thoughts are not as the Lord's.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." (Isaiah 55: 8-9 NIV).

Why then?, not seek wisdom higher than ours in whatever it is we are faced with. When we ask for thoughts higher than ours in a prayer deepened with fasting, before us will be ways unveiled higher than we would ever have imagined.

The Kind of Fast Pleasing to the Lord.

Among the Jews, when the times of fasting were commenced, the Israelities dressed in sackcloth and smeared themselves with ashes. The sackcloth and ashes were a representation of submission in humility, repentance,

debasement and sorrow (1 Kings 20:31-32, 1 Maccabees 3:47, Esther 4:3, Jonah :5-7).

Sackcloth and ashes were used as an outward emblem of one's inward condition, which was a reflection of a humbled heart desperately in yearn to reach the Lord. The act (wearing sackcloth and smearing of ashes) however, seemed to be valued by the people more than the inward submission in humility-and in so doing, the essence of fasting was lost in the gesture of appearance.

Knowing how much the acts did not reflect their hearts, the Lord declared to His people saying:

" Even now.....return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning. Rend your hearts and not your garments." (Joel 2: 12-13 NIV).

Fasting had become more of a show practice than a desired need to go down in humility before the Lord. It was not the ripped garments and dreadful appearance that the Lord required, but a heart broken and ready to surrender. (*Rend your hearts and not your garments*).

In his time of ministry, Jesus too was displeased with believers that neglected their appearance such that people would see to it that they were fasting. He terms them as 'hypocrites', for they do so not in humility to the Lord, but in search of admiration. He affirms how theirs is a reward on earth (Public approval) and not from the Lord, for it is not the Lord they seek, but world recommendation. (Matthew 6:16-18).

What then is the fasting required of by the Lord?

St. Basil appeals to the faithful that:

"Let us fast an acceptable and very pleasing fast to the Lord. True fast is the estrangement from evil, temperance of tongue, abstinence from anger, separation from desires, slander, falsehood and perjury. Privation of these is true fasting."

From the saint's opening appeal: *Let us fast an acceptable and very pleasing fast to the Lord'*, we get to learn that it is possible to fast, and yet have the sacrifice unacceptable or unpleasing before the Lord.

St. Basil's averment is in agreement with the scripture of Isaiah. The Israelities

were at the time having questions about their allegiance towards Yahweh, and through the Prophet Isaiah: the Lord responded:

" 'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it?, why have we humbled ourselves and you have not noticed?..' (Isaiah 58: 3 NIV).

The Lord affirmed not accepting the kind of fast his people were offering, and in the verse that follows,(the Lord) explains why.

" ...Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife....You can not fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high." (Isaiah 58: 3-4 NIV).

The Lord Himself teaches that when we fast:-seeking to reach out to Him, we ought not to do as we please, but rather do the will of Him to whom we humble ourselves before. Acts such as injustice, slander, anger, perjury among others, defile the essence of fasting as also stated by St. Basil. (*Privation of these is true fasting*).

The Fasting He requires.

After outlining why He wasn't pleased with the kind of fasting His people were carrying out, the Lord revealed the kind (of fasting) acceptable in his presence.

" Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter- when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood." (Isaiah 58: 6-7 NIV).

When we yearn to align with God by humbling ourselves in prayer and fasting, to it is more than just abstinence or fore going of meals. We ought to aliken God in His rectitude and distinctness of love (1 John 4: 7-8, 11), knowing that that which we do to the least of our brothers and sisters, we do to Him. (Matthew 25:40).

In showing love to his people, we show love to God, and more importantly reflect the image of His divine compassionate spirit in which we were created. To the Lord, the fast acceptable before Him is: *to reflect His virtues of love*

and mercy to the rest of our brothers and sisters-just like He does to us when we humble ourselves in fast.'

"mercy is the life blood of fasting. So if you pray: fast: if you fast, show mercy." St.Peter Chrysologus.

The Reward.

Whenever we submit ourselves to the Lord, He straightens our paths (Proverbs 3:5-6). To submit to any authority or being, it takes one to be humble, for humility is the epicentre of submission.

Knowing that a humble heart is one which the Lord can not reject (Psalms 51:17), when we as believers humble ourselves in fasting (acceptable to the Lord), He not only lifts us up(a reward for humility), but also straightens our lives' paths (a reward for submission).

As decoded in the book of Isaiah, there are a number of promises on how the Lord does so (lifts and straightens the paths of those who offer an acceptable fast to Him).

After giving insight on the kind (of fast) appealing to Him, the Lord himself states the rewards for those that offer themselves diligently in fasting to Him. He says:

*"Then your light will break forth like the dawn (**breakthrough**), and your healing will quickly appear (**healing**): then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard (**protection**). Then you will call, and the Lord will answer: you will cry for help, and He'll say: here I am (**answer to prayers**). The Lord will guide you always (**guidance**): He will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame (**provision**). You will be a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. (**never lack**) "* (Isaiah 58:8-9,11 NIV).

The Lord is faithful and surely true to His promises. The scripture says:

" God is not human that he should lie, not a human being that he should change his mind. Does He speak and then not act? Does He promise and not fulfill?" (Numbers 23: 19 NIV).

In our earthly journey as believers, many trials come our way. Time and over, there arises the need for a breakthrough, healing, protection, answers to our prayers, guidance, as well as provision in moments of scantiness.

All these, the Lord affirms to those who sincerely humble themselves in a fast appealing to him. As stated in Isaiah 55:11, the Lord's word can not return to him until the purpose for which He said and sent it, is succeeded.

Brothers and sisters, the promises of the Lord to those who fast earnestly, lie in wait like a fruit-filled tree awaiting to be harvested. The question remains unto us then, are willing to humble ourselves in fasting and prayer to reap of these fruits?

" To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen."

Philippians 4:20